FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

Volume 36, Number 2 April 1985

BACK TO BASICS

Since 1949 the purpose of Fellowship in Prayer is to promote the practice of prayer among all religious faiths whose fundamental belief is in God regardless of race, creed, or color, and whose tenets include the universal attributes of truth, honesty, justice, and mercy, that thereby there may arise a closer relation to Almighty God and a deeper spirit of fellowship among mankind.

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We are extremely grateful to Alvin Currier for contributing the line drawings in this issue, and for graciously offering his assistance and support. We warmly encourage submissions by other artists dedicated to a spiritual practice that is reflected in their work.

This bi-monthly publication is subsidized by the Ruth Allison Lilly Fund.
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"For a world united in prayer"

Words of Wisdom

Modern civilization can survive only if it begins again to educate the heart, which is the source of wisdom, for modern man is now far too clever to survive without wisdom.

– E. F. Schumacher

All ideologies are idiotic, whether religious or political, for it is conceptual thinking, the conceptual word, which has so unfortunately divided man.

–J. Krishnamurti

Put down your opinion, your condition, your situation, then you will not be stuck. Always stay open. Working in a gas station will be no problem, or cleaning someone's house. If you are holding your idea, "I want a high class job, or a house, or a car," then you will have a problem. Zen means put everything down. Then you can control any situation or condition.

– Seung Sahn

Around each man – enclosed within the wide sphere of his activity – is laid a natural circle of things which, before all, he is called to set free – his animals and his walls, his garden and his meadow, his tools and his food. In so far as he cultivates and enjoys them in holiness, he frees their souls. "For this reason a man should always have mercy on his tools and all his possessions."

– Martin Buber

As long as we are prepared to learn, we will stay young, never aging. But the moment we say, "I have studied and I know," we begin to grow old. . . . The moment we let ourselves be praised as an important person, we grow old. . . The moment we become a teacher instead of a student, we age, time passes, intelligence disappears, and we are left to face our Judgment Day.

– M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen

Editorial MERCY

I have painful memories of the past- broken friendships, indiscretions, terrible decisions that have brought harm and waste. There are times when, as I try to enter silence, my usual foggy preoccupation is replaced, not by clarity or joy, but by a throbbing remorse over my past which I find difficult to bear. I know that I am one of those who needs compassion.

My own journey began, and to some extent still revolves around the question of how my life can be lived in a way that matters. Experience has led me through pain and failure to the unanticipated conviction that my own will, my mind, and willingness to pay whatever price is asked, are not enough. I can not make my life matter.

I am learning to be grateful for this lesson.

Raised as a christian, one of the aspects of my religion that struck me as especially odd, even amusing in its irony, was the statement that the word "Gospel" meant – literally – good news. Was the Gospel not, after all, really a set of rules? Rules in my experience were not good news.

I am learning that what lives and breathes in the Gospel is not a set of rules or ideas as to how we should behave. It is wonder and joy at the fact that barren lives, full of failure and deception can be changed – transformed.

This possibility of transformation, of new life, is the good news that gave the Gospel its name. It is the same spirit that permeates records left in other times and places, and that speaks to us now in the lives of those who have – sometimes in spite of themselves – discovered that our hopeless situations, our seemingly intractable natures – our hard heads and harder hearts – can be changed, will change, if we allow it to happen.

But change has its price, and for me now, the largest part of that price seems to be a surrender of suffering. God's ways are strange. I offer my remorse and am given mercy.

E.M.

Readers are encouraged to send us the names and addresses of those who would like to receive future issues of Fellowship in Prayer. This bi-monthly publication is available at no charge to anyone who requests it. Please write or telephone our office during business hours: Fellowship in Prayer, 134 Franklin Corner Road, Lawrenceville, New Jersey 08648. Telephone (609) 896-3636. We will be happy to hear from you.

From our Readers

Thank you and everyone involved with Fellowship in Prayer. I am a person who is struggling spiritually. I don't know how to explain this struggle except to say it's been like being in a dense fog, never knowing where I'm at or in what direction I am going.

I am, however, beginning to see some light. . . . The fog is lifting a bit. I'm beginning to understand a little more about myself and about my purpose in life. My relationship with God is becoming a closer one.

Your publication has helped me over the past few years. Often when I've felt very down and all alone in the world, your publication would come in the mail and give me a great lift. It has often strengthened me when I've needed it the most. Thank you all so much.

Name withheld – Phoenix, Arizona

I really enjoy your publications. I feel they have been beneficial to me in my spiritual growth. I am especially in agreement with your philosophy of not limiting ourselves to any particular religious doctrine. . . .

Al and Nancy Whitecavage – Maitland, Florida

It is a delight to find what you brought together for publication periodically. I have learned a lot, gently. As a Methodist-Quaker-Unitarian-Presbyterian-Catholic, I am essentially limited to the Christian interpretation of the world. Thank you for offering more.

Esther Seaman – Waldport, Oregon

We would like to continue to reach out to new readers. Your contributions enable us to remain freely available to those who are at that tender place where the search for truth begins. Your generosity also helps us to nurture ties between people of good will in all faiths – an increasingly important part of our outreach.

As Fellowship in Prayer enters its thirty-fifth year, we look forward to a period of renewed hope, promise and growth. Your prayers, advice and contributions are needed and appreciated.

IN MEMORIAM

We regret to inform our readers of the death of Mr. Sydney D. Maddock, who passed away peacefully on July 16, 1984, in Naples, Florida, at the age of ninety six. Mr. Maddock was a member of the Founding Committee, a signer of the Certificate of Incorporation, and the first Vice-President of Fellowship in Prayer. He will be deeply missed by his friends.

In the early years of Fellowship in Prayer, when Founder Carl Evans and Co-Founder Kathryn G. Brown had to struggle long and hard just to keep the organization alive, Mr. Maddock generously donated his time, talents, and resources. "I have often wished that I could have continued in an active role," Mr. Maddock later wrote. "Carl Evans was a realistic dreamer. He originated a fine venture, and did much for many people." Over the years Mr. Maddock continued to promote the goals of Fellowship in Prayer, as well as other charitable activities. When prospects at times seemed bleak, Mr. Maddock "never refused to offer encouragement and support," says current President, Kathryn G. Brown. Friends who knew him best remember him as a man who disliked publicity or personal glory, but who was always willing to serve when needed.

Throughout his active and successful career as a businessman, and even after retirement, Mr. Maddock worked quietly and unstintingly on behalf of worthwhile causes. He was Trustee and Elder of the Hitchcock Memorial Church in Scarsdale, New York, a director of the White Plains YMCA, a board member of Western College for Women in Miami, Ohio, and founder and chairman of the board for the Moorings Park Retirement Residence in Naples, Florida.

Born on the South Side of Chicago in 1888, Mr. Maddock worked his way through high school as a trolley car newsboy. Starting work as a factory laborer, he became a bank officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin. After serving on the War Trade Board in Washington, D.C., he became an administrative director for the Board. During 1920-21 he was a business manager of American Co. in Shanghai, China. Mr. Maddock eventually became president of the C.I.T. Financial Corporation, which handled the financing of heavy machinery, industrial equipment, and mercantile accounts. He was also an avid fisherman.

Mr. Maddock is survived by his two children, Janet M. Kelliher of Belmont, California, and S. Dean Maddock of Naples, Florida, and by seven grandchildren.

Molly Forer, one of the original members of Fellowship in Prayer's Surrender Group, died of a heart attack in February. For many years she and her husband Morris ran a pharmacy in Princeton, N.J., and cared for two adopted children. Molly will be deeply missed by her friends at Fellowship in Prayer.

Spirituality and Everyday Life

During a recent Fellowship gathering, a book-keeper confessed that she had difficulty reconciling her occupation with her spiritual search. "Can those of us who are in the world doing, say, accounting, at the same time be serving God?" she asked.

With this question in mind, we present some reflections by ordinary people who have learned to "remember to remember" that God is with us in our everyday lives. If you would like to share your meditations with other members of the Fellowship, do not hesitate to write. But be sure to keep your writing straightforward and brief (no more than four typewritten pages, or about 1,000 words). We have found that simply sharing the experience of God's love and reality can begin a process of transformation in our own lives and the lives of others. The same may be true for you.

Simplify! Simplify!

One of the signs of spiritual growth is the simplification of life. This does not mean that daily routines cease, although inconsequential items do become less insistent. What counts is not so much concerned with outer complexities as with the inner conglomeration of desires, thoughts and aspirations that confuse and irritate the mind. When the center of consciousness becomes well established, this welter of mental distraction diminishes. The wayward themes seem to become harmonized; impulses relate themselves to a total pattern. It is very easy to open the self to meditation at the beginning of the day and at the end (if one could stay awake) but there are many hours between, when recollection needs to be sustained. "That which I will not that I do." It is like learning to drive a car. You have to *remember* to do certain things at first, but gradually your reactions become automatic and you don't need to think about it any more. Just enjoy the scenery.

Coinciding with this, when the Inner Light shines brightly nothing can intercept that steady beam. It is not necessary to adjust the vision. It just happens.

But to establish the practice of the presence of God so that it becomes as natural as breathing – that requires a rigorous apprenticeship. When I think about it now it sounds silly, but I resorted to some trivial and seemingly ridiculous ways of keeping myself reminded. For instance, I fastened a large safety pin to the front of my dress and I carried a button in my pocket that I felt every time I reached in to find a pencil or a handkerchief. These objects were preferable to Moslem prayer beads which, although they serve the same purpose, called for questioning, whereas no one suspected a safety pin or a button.

Before entering anyone's doorway, I made a practice of inaudibly invoking a blessing on the house. This was an old Hebrew custom and interestingly enough, I found it still carried on among the simple folk of Ireland. When joining a group or meeting an individual, I thought "May God accompany me." At the beginning of a committee meeting and during the course of discussion I tried to imagine God was there among us as an invisible, but somehow participating extra entity, not an embodiment but an essence – an unsubstantiated presence that could ease tensions and flow into decisions, and assure the moral justification of compromises; and above all, hopefully, never weary from the tediousness of irrelevant details. At first this seemed a bothersome, idiotic obligation but gradually the effort subsided into habit. My patience expanded with practice. In all of life, the processes of growth are gradual, unhurried and related. "He who opens the rose, does it so simply," wrote Tagore. In all the natural world this principle is demonstrated. Only human beings get so mixed up because they fail to divest themselves of encumbrances and never discover the simplifying axiom that underlies all existence in this "little gleam of time between two eternities."

by Josephine Whitney Duveneck

SPIRITUAL BOUNDARIES

I'd like to share with you one experience of spiritual seeking and finding that I've had. I was a new nurse, just out of school. My first job was in the operating room. It was an unhappy time for me and a period of great loneliness. I found meeting for worship terribly difficult at this time. To talk of a gathered meeting at the same time as to know how few people were available to me seemed unfair.

One day at work I was asked to work over on an emergency surgery – an abdominal aneurysm. Instead of scrub nurse handling instruments or circulating nurse handling the room and autoclaves, I was bumped into serving as surgical assistant or retractor holder. The case seemed long. At one point in the surgery, the surgeons turned away from the body to consult the x-rays. The entire abdomen was open in front of me. Carefully I slipped my hand into the pocket between the liver and the intestines. I was about wrist deep

when I became aware of a change. The warmth of this body caused me to feel uncertain of exactly where my fingers ended and the patient's tissue began. The boundaries between flesh seemed to have been dissolved.

As I withdrew my hand, my hand, my eyes and mind refocused. If this blending is possible in the physical world of bodies, how much easier it must be in the spiritual world. I know that one can never actually know a single other person and as I sit here between Gardiner and Doris I am aware of the differences as well as the blending. But I also know of spiritual oneness. It impels me to continue searching to know God. It is as near as the boundaries of my hand.

by Jane Wilson

THE HOUSEHOLDER AND THE PILGRIM

The kids are crying and the house is a mess. It's time to go to work and someone has drawn a picture on my zafu with a crayon.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

At times like this, when I remember to remember, the Jesus Prayer slips in under the chaos of my thoughts like a glass of cool water on a hot day.

"You can pray with the TV on and the kids screaming," Father Theophane told us during a retreat at the Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. I know he's right, but often I'd gladly trade my trials for his which somehow seem more appealing. That afternoon I stood in the snow outside the abbey and envied the monks their silence.

Envy is one of my trials.

There are times when life in the world seems unbearable, days when the inner call to solitude and the demands from without clash without mercy, moments when I want to scream in frustration. Then Nicolas, my toddler, grins at his mischief; Molly, who just turned seven, puts away her Cabbage Patch doll and gives me an understanding hug; and Cici, my wife, pats my back for support. I put down the book I was trying to escape into, tuck away my angry thoughts, and go into the kitchen to make a salad for dinner.

For a couple of months I've been mulling over in my mind the tension I feel between the seemingly conflicting roles of "house-holder" and "pilgrim." Just thinking about myself, pulled apart in different directions, made it worse. When I sat down at the typewriter to try and describe me to myself, Nicolas came in to join me. After turning the overhead light on and off a few times, he wrapped his mother's discarded blouse around him like a sarong and waddled outside to look for Molly, who was behind the garage trying to catch a wild kitten. Trying futilely to conjure up a coherent phrase which would express my condition, I began to worry that Nicholas had wandered into the street outside and gave up to go rescue him from certain death.

Thank God for late sleepers in my house. I arise before dawn, turn on the coffee pot, and sit on my zafu in a corner of the TV room for half an hour. My concentration is disturbed slightly by the presence of a toy car on the

floor beside me, but the silent house supports and comforts me. The cat I locked in the bathroom has given up meowing and gone to sleep in the clotheshamper.

What got me going on the householder and the pilgrim was reading about stages of life as the Hindus see it in India, and I wanted to know where I fit in. This is my second house to hold. The two children from my first marriage are almost grown men and live a half-hour's drive away. Now at forty-five, I have two more children to care for and it will be a dozen years before they leave my side.

I also see my present existence as a pilgrimage. For several years now I have been searching for God in different ways in books, in the Catholic Church and on my zafu. Being romantically inclined, I fantasize about being a monk, Trappist or Buddhist, in a cell or in a cave. I pretend.

If only it was easier. But it isn't.

The monk has his trials and I doubt that I will know them firsthand in this lifetime, but I do know what it's like to be an extended householder. It's tears and giggles and skinned knees and birthdays and weekends full of boredom and days when there is never enough time to get everything done. It's saying grace before dinner, when we remember to remember. Nicolas in his high chair holds out his stubby hands, familiar with this ritual, and we circle our hands around the circle of our kitchen table. Molly is good at saying grace. Words of simple thanks, simply to God, come easily to her clean lips and lay waste to my inner debate about the meaninglessness of language. Molly and Nicolas simply accept it as just one more ordinary mystery of life.

Phrases I've read in books slip into my mind unexpectedly. "If you're searching for God you've already found Him," is one that's stuck around for a few weeks. And I know that I have, on one level, while on another I continue my pilgrimage through the desert, the Jesus Prayer on my lips en route to my heart.

The desert that I'm in is full of trials, but these tests of faith are neither wild animals nor blazing sun. It's a book that I have to read while my family moves around me as if I'm dead. It's the heat of anger I feel when Molly trespasses a rule, the reasons for which I've long forgotten. It's the fear in her eyes as I scream at her, and the recognition that in my irrationality I become the baby I no longer will allow her to be.

My trials are embedded in day-to-day life and they come at me with little let-up. At the office I plunge into projects which absorb my attention like a sponge. During a smoke break, which I have to force myself to take, the thought occurs: "You've forgotten to remember God." And I did, and now I do, briefly, until the projects demand attention again.

God is Presence, and there are thousands of reasons to forget. The trial, in all its forms, is to remember, to remember to say grace before taking the first mouthful of food, to remember to forgive everyone everything before drifting off to sleep, to remember that life, no matter how trivial or dramatic, is holy.

– *Willy Yaryan*

Contemplative Seeing:

Reading the Book of Nature

by Wayne Teasdale

I want to share with you an intuition, an illumination that has been steadily growing in my experience for some years. When I was an undergraduate I went on two occasions to visit a monastery in upstate New York. There I met a very holy monk who engaged me in conversation. We had only two talks together, but one of them was to have a lasting effect on my life. He and I went for a walk in the monastic garden. The flowers were arrayed in all their glory, swaying in the breeze of a summer's afternoon. The sun was bright, and few clouds were in the sky this day.

As we walked around the flowers, he turned to me and said in a gentle, almost fatherly tone, "Look at the flowers carefully, because each one is a contemplation. They express in a special way God's love for you, and for all of us." Of course I was thoroughly puzzled. Flowers don't talk; how could they express anything? And what in heaven's name was contemplation? What a strange word. I didn't realize it then, but the saintly monk had just initiated me into a mystical way of seeing, of perceiving, which was a form of contemplation, and that this seed of insight would grow, bearing fruit later on in my life.

Indeed, he showed me a kind of seeing that is primordial in origin. It has existed from the dawn of consciousness. This seeing is the way of the heart. Such a way is radically different from ordinary perception, the approach of science or even reason. It includes a rational dimension, but is not a slave to

reason. In Saint-Exupery's charming classic, *The Little Prince,* the fox tells the boy ". . . it is only with the heart that one can see clearly." It is the truth of this statement, as it bears upon what the monk taught me, that I want to explore in what follows.

To "see" with the heart refers to the natural ability of all people to intuitively penetrate the mystery of existence. For the "heart" is a symbol of this intuitive capacity, something that resides in the depths of the soul. Hinduism refers to these depths as the "cave of the heart", and Buddhism calls the intuitive capacity the "third eye". It is this third eye which must be opened if we are to see what is essential. It is this capacity for intuitive or contemplative sight that must be reawakened.

Intuition or contemplation is cultivated by learning to be still, that is, *to be* rather than to do. In modern life we are completely taken up with activity, but the only thing we really have to do, in the long run, is simply *to be.* This means that we should permit ourselves the leisure to look long and hard at things: at trees, flowers, birds, mountains, stars, rocks, at butterflies, snowflakes and other people. A mystic once defined contemplation as "a long, loving look at the real." That is certainly where it begins, in looking. As we acquire a proficiency in this intuitive activity, in this subtle kind of "seeing", we begin to penetrate the secrets of nature, being and life, or rather, they begin to reveal themselves to us. The medieval Franciscans called this ability the gift of "reading the Book of Nature." St. Francis himself once said that "If you know how to look, then all of nature is a Book of Divine Widsom." And this is also what the saintly monk was trying to teach me.

When the contemplative faculty is working, and intuition is alert, the soul is in contact with the whole symbolic order of reality, with the intrinsic meanings in all things, especially what exists in the natural world around us. That is what St. Francis' statement means, and that is perhaps something of what the fox is suggesting. Learning to "look", to be still, *to be* allows us to *feel* the mystery of life that surrounds us on all sides. For mystics *feel* the Presence of God, intuit it, more than anything else. Again, it is this intuitive capacity at work, this ability to "see" in an essential way. It is also a form of mystical illumination. It enables us to grasp things in their unity, because we are touching them from our own depths, from the "cave of the heart", the center of our being where we are already one with God and all beings.

Let me now apply this contemplative principle to a few examples I have experienced in the natural world. I begin with a flower, a rose. If we contemplate the rose what is the reality we see? What do we see intuitively? Using our contemplative capacity, we can comprehend the rose in its ultimate Source, and we can know its symbolic or sacramental function. How so? Well, we know that this lovely rose has a history. It has developed from a seed planted in the earth. Its reality is not just its mature state in bloom-time. The rose – like any being – traverses numerous stages: seedling, little shoot, various intermediate stages, a bud, an opening bud with a hint of color, and finally a glorious full-bloom form. It has blossomed into that extraordinarily beautiful creature we admire so much.

Now in this unfolding, evolutionary process, the first lesson the rose

teaches us is that reality – as exemplified in its own case – is basically invisible, intangible and mysterious, since it is a gradual, hidden process moving towards completion and totality. The rose in its entire history symbolizes this process and the end or goal of totality, that towards which all existence is moving. The full-bloom stage symbolizes totality. Also, the rose shows by its subtle beauty and delicacy that this end or purpose of life is spiritual. The perfection and harmony of its form communicate this metaphysical truth. Of course, the rose eventually fades, loses its petals, and dies. But this too has a lesson; it is a way of saying that the rose is only a symbol of spiritual perfection and the totality, that it is not an end in itself. The rose is rather a sign in nature pointing the way for us. The totality, the Source which is God, is calling us to union with Him, to perfect fulfillment.

Let us consider the further example of a snowflake. Such a tiny, ephemeral entity, but how momentous its significance and far-reaching its implications! A snowflake is no haphazard thing. Like a flower it has a certain perfection of form. Each snowflake has an elaborate design whose structure follows a theme of order intrinsic to it; it is a kind of mandala. And no two snowflakes are ever the same. It seems that in every snowflake one is drawn into the center. The intricate structure calls attention to the center of the design, almost suggesting as it does the movement into the heart.

What does a snowflake tell us about existence? What is its symbolic function? Snowflakes show us a lot about the mystery of being. For a snowflake is a microcosm, a little world that reflects the cosmos at large. They are a symbolic key unlocking the mystery by giving us a substantial clue. On an intuitive level we can see that they suggest a grand design or master plan behind, in and beyond the universe. And like the rose, they are fleeting because their purpose is to point to the truth. For a snowflake is a signature of Divine Intelligence. By their qualities of translucence and purity they give us a glimpse of Spirit.

A butterfly is even more instructive and much closer to home. In its development we can discern the movement of reality in human life itself. The butterfly begins as a humble caterpillar, a worm-like creature. After crawling about on the earth for awhile, it spins a cocoon around itself, and sleeps. The cocoon is really a second womb. But then it breaks out, and this ethereal being, the butterfly, comes forth like the phoenix reborn. In its fragile grace and dignity of movement, it represents something truly celestial.

The whole process of the butterfly's growth symbolizes the ultimate reality of life, its destiny. The wormlike form of the caterpillar is like our present existence in the flesh. The cocoon represents death, and the breaking out of the cocoon is similar to resurrection. The butterfly is in fact an ancient symbol of resurrection. It signifies our ascended life in the Spirit, the Divine, in Heaven. And so it is also a symbol of immortality.

It is only our intuitive or contemplative power that allows us to see in this definitive way. Until we learn to do so, we are not fully human. For this way of "seeing" is our inner compass, directing us to the safe shores of eternity; it is a grace that assures our arrival into Paradise where the human is finally transformed into the Divine.

The Question

Once a little village received word that a great wise man was coming to visit. This wise man, or zaddick, had promised to answer any question the people might have about God. They were greatly honored by the news, but as time passed, a curious anxiety began to overtake them. The only question they could think of was, "What kind of a question do we ask a zaddick?"

The people went to the rabbi, but because he was a very scholarly man, this question of questions was even harder on him than on them. His eyes became glazed and his jaw tight, and all he could say was, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!"

When the day of the zaddick's visit arrived, the people were so upset they couldn't think or speak at all. They sat in mortified silence, as an old and bearded man in tattered coat walked in calmly and took his place in front of them. The silence continued. The mortification increased. The zaddick waited patiently, but no one even dared look at him.

The zaddick cast an eye about the crowd. One of his eyebrows raised, and a faint smile played about his mouth. He began to hum, quietly at first but then with increasing joy and vigor. One of his feet began to tap a rhythm on the floor; and suddenly, as if there were no stopping it, his voice broke into song.

The people forgot themselves as the joy of the zaddick flowed into them. They began to sing along with him; and before they knew it, they were up and dancing. They sang and danced to God, and about God, and with God – on and on until nothing but the joy of God had any meaning.

The wise man clapped his hands for them to stop and said, "I trust this answers your question?"

Asking For It. . . .

A sufi went to visit a King renowned for his piety as well as his absolute power. Each day the King made all his subjects gather before the palace at dawn and prostrate themselves. Then the King would lift up his arms and say,

"Lord of the Universe, I hereby command you to cause the sun to rise,"

As soon as the sun rose, every one could go about his business.

After this ceremony, the sufi approached the king and said, "Surely you don't believe that you can really command God to do your bidding."

"Perhaps not," the King replied, "but what need have I of a God whom I could not command?"

Back to Basics, Back to God

For those of you who go into the poustinia [the Russia word for "desert" or "hermitage"], this is the essence of it: to fold the wings of your intellect. In this civilization of the West everything is sifted through your heads. You are so intellectual, so full of knowledge of all kinds. The poustinia brings you into contact first and foremost with solitude. Secondly, it brings you in contact with God.

– Catherine de Hueck Doherty

It was a foggy and unseasonably mild February afternoon – spring had made a tantalizing, premature appearance – when I stepped off the bus at Menomonie, Wisconsin, and saw Alvin Currier for the first time. Ever since last summer, when I made my first visit to St. Herman's Hermitage while Currier and his wife were in Finland, I was eager to meet this unorthodox hermit in person (see "An Unorthodox Hermit's Prayer," *Fellowship in Prayer,* August 1984). Currier had been a chaplain of Macalester College from 1964 to 1975, when his position was terminated. Rather than seek another professional position, he decided to build a cabin in the woods and devote himself completely to a life of prayer. What also intrigued me was that Currier, an ordained Presbyterian minister, had chosen to practice Eastern Orthodoxy – the tradition into which I was baptised, but which few Americans, including myself, know much about.

During my earlier stay at the Hermitage, I had seen some of the fruits of his ten-years' labor – several rather primitive guest cabins, a two-story

commons, and a wooden chapel crowned with an onion dome – all simply and painstakingly constructed, often with hand-me-down or unfinished materials, much like the homes of early settlers. I had also seen the beautiful icons which Currier had painted, and carvings which he had received as gifts and placed out of doors, where they blended with and complemented the beauty of nature. I was moved by the warmth and humanity expressed in Currier's writings and in the testimonies of his friends.

As I stepped off the bus, I saw a bearded man in a parka and oversized beret who stood out unmistakably amid the crowd milling in front of the "Piranha" cafe. He was smiling so warmly it seemed the most natural thing in the world to walk over and hug him – ordinary words of greeting would have been both inadequate and unnecessary. Soon we were driving towards the Hermitage and chatting like old friends.

Alvin, who has reclaimed his baptismal name after being "Al" for many years, explained that he had tried in the sixties to create a "holy space" within a new million-dollar college chapel, but had felt frustrated. It was difficult to make room for mystery or wonder in such a setting. When he lost his job, he understood it as a sign that he should sell his house in St. Paul and move with his wife and family to a cabin in the wilds of western Wisconsin – a place where the nearest town has around a thousand inhabitants and where the rolling farmlands have the look of a Grant Wood painting. Here he planned to live as a hermit and practice the way of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Alvin speaks of his spiritual life with gentle humor, taking his goal and his art but not himself seriously. In the West religious people are supposed to be solemn, but the Russian Orthodox have always appreciated "holy fools" – those willing to seem like idiots because, in St. Paul's words, the wisdom of God is foolishness to worldly-wise intellectuals (I Corinthians: I, 18-27). Alvin plays the fool by dressing like a bohemian and talking in funny accents. It was a foolishness I found refreshing after the pretentiousness so often found in academic life.

As we drove through the fog-covered farmlands, with their contrasting patches of stark white snow and black earth, Alvin told me more about himself and his ministry. After graduating from Union Seminary in 1954, he spent a year in St. Andrews – the Mecca of Presbyterianism – followed by a stint in southern Minnesota, where he was a pastor for several years. From 1959-60, he was an exchange pastor in Germany; and for several years in the early sixties, after the Berlin Wall went up, he was involved with the Berlin Free University and made frequent visits to East German Christians, bringing messages and gifts back and forth across the Iron Curtain. He wrote a book about his experiences called *No Easter for East Germany.*

The sun was setting as we arrived at the Hermitage. We trudged up the hill through slushy snow and entered the main cabin where Alvin's wife Anastasia was drinking tea and talking to Vic, a fortyish retreatant from the outskirts of Chicago.

Anastasia greeted me with a hug, and after a few preliminaries, offered to take me to my cabin, which had been warmed up in anticipation of my

arrival. The first thing I discovered when I walked outside was that my city slicker boots were worse than useless in the slushy snow. Fortunately, Anastasia had an extra pair of rubber boots that fit me fine and gripped the snow like radial tires. I was glad for my new, more practical footgear as I followed Anastasia along a slippery path to a ten-by-twelve foot cabin nestled on the side of the hill. It had simple furnishings – a bunk bed, rocker, table and a sideboard painted in peasant style – all vintage yard sale items. But everything was so clean orderly that I was enchanted. Little touches of beauty, like silk flowers, driftwood, and a handpainted icon, made the cabin seem warm and inviting. There was even a hand-made wooden flute lying on the table ("It was left by a Quaker who'd come up here for his honeymoon," Anastasia explained.) The pot-bellied wood stove imparted a special warmth subtly different from central heating. Anastasia, ever practical, took pains to explain how to stoke the fire and trim the oil lamp

The well house at Valamo Orthodox Monastery in Finland
"Let us also hold water in awe, it is precious, deserving of reverence

By the time we returned to the main cabin, I felt almost giddy – no doubt from breathing the fresh country air, which can be as heady at first as hard cider. Alvin was in a clownish mood and spoke to us in a thick accent. "Vould you men like to go to sauna?" he asked. He pronounced it SOW-na, with a half Finnish, half Germanic lilt. "Ja, first vee go to SOW-na, then to prayers. Den vee eat sometink. Dis is goot, ja?" He smiled and winked like a wily peasant.

We were all in good spirits as Alvin led us men carefully down the hill to an old-fashioned sauna like the ones found on farms in Finland. We stripped in the commons and walked through the cold, damp night air to the hot little building, which is as different from a city sauna as Wonderbread is from home-baked loaves. Vic, the son of Lithuanian immigrants, felt immediately at home. Inhibitions and anxieties melted away as we talked and laughed and washed each other's backs. This, apparently, is a Finnish custom, but one which I think Jesus would have approved. After all, he washed the feet of his disciples, a precedent which few Christians have been down-to-earth enough

to emulate.

It soon became clear that the sauna was part of Alvin's spiritual practice, a way of affirming the goodness of the body along with the soul. In this way he is very Orthodox, since Orthodoxy has always affirmed that Christ's incarnation redeemed man's body as well as spirit.

The sauna continued for over an hour and a half – a slow, leisurely way for our bodies and spirits to make friends. We all talked easily about ourselves and our concerns – a year of group therapy could not have brought us any closer together. When we went out for a roll in the snow, it felt as if our skins had been flayed off. But when we returned to the sauna, it felt good to have sloughed off our old skin. Our bodies tingled and glowed with a halo of steam when we walked by candlelight back to the commons to dress.

Alvin rang a great bell announcing evening prayers as Vic, Anastasia and I entered the simple A-frame chapel. There the vibrantly colored icons and glittering candles seemed as striking as the richly garbed magi in the stable where Jesus was born. Over the altar was an icon of the Theodokos – the Mother of God – cradling the infant Jesus in the circle of her love. Man and woman, mother and child, rich beauty and even more enriching poverty – everything here testified to harmony and balance. When Alvin and Anastasia held hands and chanted the final parts of their half-formal, half-improvised liturgy, I felt as if I had witnessed a sacred and universal drama, the drama of love and redemption.

"The kitchen table is also an altar," Alvin told us as we sat down, joined hands to pray, and enjoyed an excellent country meal of freshly baked bread, dumplings, squash, corn, and tomato juice – the vegetables donated by local farmers. The holiness of food is an important theme in the Curriers' lives, as it is in many religious traditions.

After dinner, I mentioned to Alvin that his sauna reminded me of the Indians' sweat lodge, and he beamed, "The Finns and the Indians have a lot in common." He explained that the Finns are the most unspoiled people in Europe and closest to their tribal roots, and to the roots of Christianity. "When the peasants get together and sing the Kavallah, the Finnish national epic, they sound just like the Indians. And like the Indians, they reverence the land. Do you know that under Finnish law, when you buy land, you can fence it off and use it, but you can't keep others from walking across it. Finns, like the Indians, feel that no one can really own mother earth."

Alvin became interested in Finland in part because it was here the Russian Orthodox built the Valam Monastery, the place where St. Herman loved to retreat. St. Herman is virtually unknown to most Americans, even though he is the only saint to be canonized on this continent by the Eastern Orthodox. Born in the suburbs of St. Petersberg around the time of the American revolution, Herman became a monk and instinctively gravitated towards the wilderness. After spending several years in Finland, he was sent as a missionary to Alaska, where fellow Russians were exploiting the resources and enslaving the Aleuts. For most of his life, he worked tirelessly on behalf of Native peoples – which got him into considerable trouble with the local authorities and almost cost him his life. None the less, Herman loved the land and its people, in whom he always saw the image of Christ.

This is the spiritual message that Alvin had discovered in Eastern Orthodoxy and in the Finnish way of life. "Many white folks try to get back to nature by going to the Indians," Alvin explained, "but I felt that it made more sense for me to go back to the tribal roots of white folks. We are all only a generation or two away from the peasant world where spirituality was rooted in the earth."

As we sat up and talked by oil lamp light, we felt easy and comfortable with each other; and the conversation ranged from our personal problems to our spiritual visions. There was a lot of laughter, and there were occasional long silences in which we could hear the night sounds and savor the presence of the spirit. I asked Alvin and Anastasia what kind of people come here, and whether or not they have had any problems.

"Now and then we get someone up here who just isn't ready," Anastasia said. Obviously, the rugged life can be very frightening to some who are habituated to city ways, but those who are drawn to solitude find the atmosphere of the Hermitage very healing. Most of the people who come are in need of quiet or some spiritual guidance. A hug, a warm fire, or a few days of acceptance can do wonders. People can choose to be completely alone, or they can partake of the Curriers' daily ritual.

"The Hermitage is our home," Alvin explained. "It's not an institution. We have no insurance. We try to receive everyone as Christ, which is an old Orthodox tradition. We aren't equipped to handle adolescents or people who need a highly structured program. And I wouldn't recommend this place to anyone who is nervous about solitude or primitive conditions. We tend to do best with more mature folks, those who are ready to deepen their spiritual practice. . ." He also mentioned an internship program for which he had received a grant enabling those from outside to the United States to come and spend at least three months in prayer as part of the Hermitage.

"I now feel the call to be a strannik, a pilgrim," Alvin explained. "I've been here in the Hermitage for almost ten years, and it's been my baby. It's time to let others carry on." He is looking for someone to be caretaker of the place when he and Anastasia spend next winter in Europe and Finland.

Alvin is also interested in pursuing his art – the art of the sacred. "Everything goes stale sooner or later," he told Vic. "Only the creation of beauty is endlessly satisfying." Alvin loves to create things – he thinks of it as "co-

creation with the Creator" – and he had made everything from icons to hand puppets. Indeed, the entire Hermitage is a work of art – each detail, no matter how humble, lovingly attended to.

While we were looking over some sketches, I asked Alvin whether anyone had influenced his thinking about the Hermitage; and he shared with me a book by Catherine Doherty – a Russian emigre who came to Canada right after World War I. An activist who had worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor, Catherine Doherty is best known for introducing into the West the Orthodox concept of poustinia, the Russian word for desert or hermitage. (In 1943 she founded Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario – a poustinia which now has more than one hundred and fifty members, including twelve priests.)

According to Doherty, the poustinik was someone who felt called to go into the "desert" and pray for the sins of the world. He or she was not cut off from society, however. Living on the outskirts of the village, the poustinik immersed himself in prayer and work, but if anyone in the village had a problem, the poustinik was available. Availability – that was the key word. "There was a gracious hospitality about him," Doherty writes, "as if he were never disturbed by anyone who came to visit him . . . His eyes seemed to sparkle with the joy of receiving a guest. He seemed to be a listening person. A person of few words, but his listening was deep, and there was a feeling that he understood." If anyone needed assistance, even for something as mundane as mowing hay, the poustinik would drop everything and help. The poustinik's life was one of total service and prayer. While not officially connected with the Church, the poustinik received its blessing. Every village was glad to have a poustinik living nearby.

The poustinik's calling is not for everyone, as Doherty and Currier both make clear. The essence of the spiritual life is available to all, whether in a condominium, tenement, or a cave. The important thing is to find a poustinia – a place of stillness – within one's heart.

Alvin and Anastasia answered the call to be poustinikki. (Which is one reason perhaps that they have only one modern convenience – the telephone.) It is not always an easy life – as Alvin's Ephiphany Message makes clear – but the Curriers' example has already helped me and many others. For now, and I hope forever, they have cleared a little space – a poustinia – which I can carry with me back to a harried and agitated world, and which can help me be more open and loving towards others and towards this extraordinarily beautiful Creation that God has made.

– A.M.

Anyone who wishes to visit the Hermitage is encouraged to do, but it should be kept in mind that the Hermitage does not have facilities for children, adolescents, or the handicapped. Arrangements should be made in advance. An internship is available for those from outside the U.S. who wish to visit the Hermitage and devote at least three months to prayers for peace. For more information, contact: St. Herman's Hermitage, Rt. 2, Box 261, Colfax, Wisconsin 54730 – (715) 962-3447.

Epiphany 1985

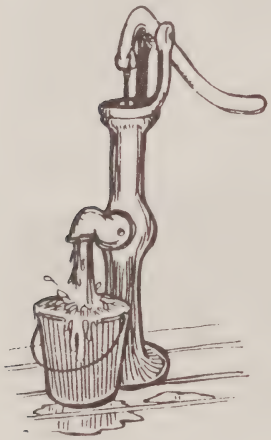
by Alvin Currier

I live without electricity, I don't have running water. I use a outhouse and don't have a flush toilet. I didn't intend to live this way. Nearly ten years ago when I felt called to move to the land to create the Hermitage as a place of prayer for all people, I wrote a newsletter soliciting money for all these things. Obviously the response to my appeal was less than I hoped for. I believe now that in the wisdom of God there were good reasons why things did not develop as I originally assumed they would. I believe now that I am beginning to understand the lesson that God meant for me to learn.

Weeks turned into months, and what little money there was went into a well on December 4, 1975. The well drillers truck couldn't make it up the hill. The choice was simple. Either drill the well at the bottom of the hill or wait until spring. The well went down a hundred and forty feet, and beautiful cold

clear water came up when I pumped. I had water, but I had to work for it. I began to have a new respect for water as I pumped it by hand and carried it up the hill in a pail. As the nights and days grew colder, I spent hours trying to solve the mystery of warmth that had always been hidden from me by the mechanism of the thermostat and furnace. I learned to kindle and keep a fire; and in the growing darkness of the lengthening nights, I learned to trim wicks and tend lamps. Day after day I worked at these simple basic tasks. Then one day I heard the wild geese heading north and realized I had survived a winter. I had lived without power from a plug, water from a faucet, heat from a thermostat, and light from a switch. I had lived in the old way that our grandparents had known. I had been more or less self-sufficient. And I was deeply satisfied.

In those early days I didn't see any connection between my way of life and the call I felt to live a life of prayer. I understood it to be a matter of economics. I lived the way I did because I had little money. What money I did have I chose to invest in other ways to build up the Hermitage. When we sold the house in the city, I thought there would be money and time enough for creature comforts. Three years passed, and just as the Hermitage became economically able to support my family in the style they were accustomed to, the tornado of divorce roared through our marriage. Almost overnight all I had left were my twelve-by-sixteen foot cabin with kerosene lamps, a rustic out-house, heat from a wood stove, and water from a well at the bottom of the hill. Never was I ever so grateful for a place as I was for that space. Often after I had cried my way home from the city I would light the lamp, stoke up the fire, set the tea kettle to singing, and thank God with new tears for the security of that simple cabin.



Like everyone caught in such a crisis, I was in horrible pain, but in that pain there was a sort of brilliant clarity. Instinctively I consolidated what little I had of spirit and possessions around the security of my tender root in this land. Clearly so much of what had mattered before was suddenly unimportant. What difference did it make that I had been a success? What difference could even money make? What counts most in life, like happiness, hope, and love, can't be bought. Sometimes it takes a crisis to make us see clearly what really matters.

My immediate need was clearly the simple survival of body and soul. My life swiftly narrowed to one day at a time and often to one hour at a time. I hauled the wood in and the ashes out. I hauled the food in and the garbage out. I hauled the water in and the pot out. In my pain I was prodded by the chores. Without me the fire wouldn't burn and the water wouldn't

flow. The cabin and I became a unit keeping each other alive. I began to be aware that there was some connection between my chores and condition of my heart and soul. Clearly there was something healthy about having to heal in such a place.

Mother nature applies a sort of tough love. She doesn't coddle – she challenges with hunger, thirst, darkness, and cold. Whenever I sank into a pool of despair, she would prod me with some basic necessity. When my spirit grew cold and I felt completely empty inside, the ashes would pile up, the woodbox would go empty and the fire would go out. Yet just like one cannot hold one's breath until one dies, so sooner or later one is nudged instinctively to action when one is living with nature. Only the drugged can refuse nature's nudging. When the cold got unbearable, I would fuss with the fire. When there was no water in the bucket, I would go to the pump. When the hunger began to hurt, I would fix something to eat. I would work almost instinctively. Without a thought but to cut the chill, I would build the fire. Yet when the cabin warmed up and got cozy, I would feel satisfied inside. Each time mother nature nudged me to stay alive, my spirit got a little boost as the byproduct of whatever I did for my body.

There were months where I did little more than just survive. One needs time to heal wounds in both the body and the soul. There was a Christmas when I cut a tree and dragged it up the hill. I never did bring it inside or decorate it. It stood outside the cabin until long after the leaves had come back on the trees. Finally, when all the needles had turned brown and fallen off, someone burned it for me. In the meantime mother nature kept nudging me along until slowly I began to motivate myself. It is easier to pump water in the daylight than to haul a bucketful up the hill in the dark. In choosing when and how to do the chores I knew needed to be done, I slowly began to become my own master instead of being pushed along by necessity. Of course, there was a lot of backsliding, but there were also days of unsuspected satisfaction. The more I motivated myself, the stronger my will to live grew. Neat piles of wood prepared to feed the fire warmed me first with pride. I slowly came to know what needed to be done if I were to live with nature. I chose to stay ahead of necessity. This was the way mother nature taught me discipline. I began to have a life of my own again.

As my life came to have a heartbeat of its own in the rhythm of chores and tasks necessary to my survival, I began to realize that I was learning how to live in a way that was new to me. Obviously, living with nature is not new; on the contrary, it is the oldest way of life. I became fascinated by the old ways, the ways of the peasants, and the ways our grandparents knew. I learned a lot about techniques and tools by using them. Far from mastering very much, I became aware of how endless and vast is the knowledge about living with nature that has been learned by humankind over millenia. Clearly, living on the land is an art. Heating with wood is an art. Tending lamps is an art. There is an art of building and bathing in a sauna. I found I had become an apprentice in these arts and that I was both fascinated and absorbed by what I was learning.

I didn't realize how much I had learned until I began to notice how little

some of my friends knew. A number of times I had the sad experience of being assured by friends that they knew all about fires and lamps only to find them on the following morning exhausted by a cold, sleepless night. Often the lamp chimneys in their cabins were black with soot. I began to realize that there are two common romantic illusions about life on the land. The first is that life in the country is easy. It isn't. It's a lot of hard work. My major source of power is my own body, and I use it with dozens of tools in dozens of tasks every day. The second illusion is that life in the woods is simple. It isn't. The art of tending lamps and fire, like the art of good cooking, is a complex affair. As I became an apprentice in the art of living with nature, the first lesson I learned was that there are no shortcuts. To master this art takes endless years of learning and arduous, disciplined practice.

I did not come here to learn just to live on the land, however. I came out here on a spiritual quest. I am an ordained minister. I had been in a comfortable professional position as a college chaplain for eleven years when my position was terminated. Although by every outward measure my ministry was successful, inside myself I felt spiritually impoverished and undernourished. I had grown to feel utterly inadequate to minister to a generation that was increasingly searching for its own spiritual roots as well as the roots of the social and human issues it cared passionately about. I knew I needed to pray. When Jesus needed to pray he went into the wilderness. All down through Christian history there is a rich tradition of retreating to the wilderness for spiritual clarity. Feeling called to create a place of prayer for myself and others, I went to the woods and bought a piece of land.

That is how I came here almost ten years ago. Friends helped me build a cabin to live in and another small cabin for guests. I started awkwardly reading prayers from a book. I did this every morning and evening. After I prayed for a year, the chapel was built. By now I had discovered a rich tradition of prayer. With time, the daily offering up of myself, my spirit, and my life, had found its own form, music, and rhythm. Both the chapel and the services sung in it became increasingly beautiful. One by one I put the books away as I learned by heart psalms, hymns, prayers, and a rhythm of devotion. My heart became full, and the beauty on the outside was matched by the beauty and strength I felt within.

I came out here looking for my spiritual roots, but I didn't have any idea of what my spiritual roots would look like. I only had an idea of where to look. As I have said, an old tradition pointed toward the wilderness, but for me, this emphasis was mainly negative, at least in the beginning. Even the word wilderness implies something negative: the opposite of what is settled or civilized. At first, I only thought about what I was leaving behind, what I was doing without. To an outsider, living in the woods often seems boring and barren, or even frightening. To avoid such feelings, I quickly got a puppy and some kittens.

Most frightening at first was the boring barreness inside myself. I missed the excitement of involvement in the only way of life I knew. I missed people. Only slowly as mother nature nudged me along with absolute necessities did I begin to notice that there was a world all around me in the woods that I overlooked when I looked back all the time. It took years, but I finally reach-

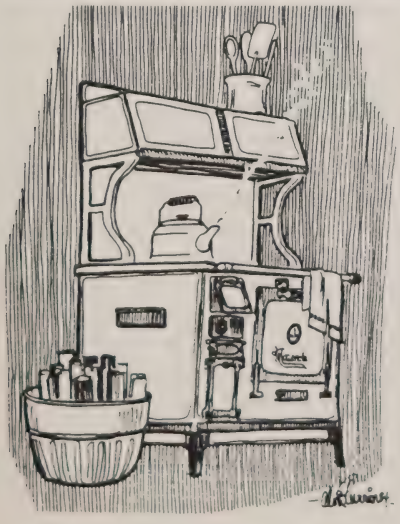
ed a sort of a threshold.

My frame of reference shifted. I slowly ceased to worry about what I might be missing as I became ever more absorbed in what I was both doing and discovering. It was as if my blinded eyes had been given the gift of sight. My surroundings begin to invite me on an endless adventure. I became enthralled by the subtlety and majesty of nature.

My journal from this period reflects how absorbed I became by the excitement of continually being confronted by new experiences. I wrote about sensing and feeling the silence. I wrote a whole essay about sounds in the night. I wrote about smells. I wrote all about fire as a brother and how I learned to live with him. I wrote about sister water. In those days I was given a bird feeder. In almost a matter of hours I discovered my neighbors in the woods that I had hardly noticed for years. Now my days are filled with the cheerfulness of these forest creatures. Best of all, I began to work the earth and plant flowers. There was enormous energy and effort involved. I grubbed and hauled dirt and fertilizer by the bucketful. I lost myself for days in this labor of love. Co-creating beauty with the Creator and all creation became an absorbing passion. My wilderness blossomed. My desert bloomed.

Then one day, quite by chance, I made another discovery. I had been eating a peach; and when I finished, I casually gave a flip of my wrist and threw the pit into the forest. To my amazement the peach pit zinged off through the trees as if shot from a gun. I looked down at my arm. Sure enough, where for years there had been nothing but flab, a firmness had set in. I was in better shape than I had ever known. The byproduct of the labor of living with nature was renewed health.

I was financially poor but inwardly enriched by my new and more creative life. What money I needed trickled in from guests, donations, and odd jobs. Because I had what money couldn't buy I found it easier to live without things that needed to be bought. No amount of money could have lured me away from the happiness I had found.



As if to cap it all, I made an even more wonderful discovery. Standing alone one day in the fullness of life and living, I saw another person who loved the land, the birds, the gardens, and me. I loved her also; and by the time the wild geese went south the following fall, we became husband and wife.

Scripture says that Christ came that we might have life and have it abundantly. The psalmist promised that we could see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. The Bill of Rights proclaims the pursuit of happiness as one of humankind's inalienable rights. I found myself arriving at

a place that I had once hardly dreamed of. I was living an abundant life surrounded by the goodness of the Lord. I was harvesting the fruit of happiness. I was strong and healthy in both body and spirit. I was able to open all the old closets of my life and take the skeletons out and bury them. I even astonished myself by finding the strength to bury my addiction to material things. I had long known that the world of evil was real. Now I knew that joy, grace, peace, power, love and blessing were also real. I had the fruits of the plant that had grown from the spiritual roots I came out here to seek.

It is obvious to me now that those long years of apprenticeship in the art of living with nature were not a tangent. I finally realized that nature nurtures both the body and the soul. Physical and spiritual health are bound together. Wholeness is in the unity of the two. They interact like breathing in and breathing out. When my spirit grew despondent I neglected my body. When I built a fire to warm my body, the byproduct was a warmth felt by my spirit.

What was new for my wife and myself was the discovery that nature is an essential element in the equation of health for both the body and the soul. The unity of body and soul is actually only one line of a triangle that includes nature. Wholeness is the circle of light around the dynamic interaction of body, soul, and nature. Just as the physical body is made to be nourished by the nutrients nature provides, so the interaction with nature's elements of earth, air, fire, and water is essential to spiritual health. Regardless of who we are today, it is only a matter of a few short generations before we find our forebearers huddled around a fire for warmth and light in a simple hand-made shelter with food from hunting and harvest and water from a lake, stream, or spring.

Modern living is nothing more than an elaboration and embellishment of the primal roots that nurtured our ancestors over millenia. It is no accident that when we feel spiritually undernourished, a deeply rooted instinct urges us to turn to nature to seek strength. This may be the reason that one lights a candle when creating an atmosphere for worship: the soul seeks the healing flame of real fire rather than the man-made glare of an electric light bulb.

Fire is an old and intimate friend of mine now. We have long ago learned to know each other's needs. He wakes me up as the rising sun, and I wake him up by stoking the stove and blowing the coals into flame. I haul the wood in and he puts the heat out. Ours is a lifegiving rhythm. He is one of the primal elements that God gives us to fashion our lives with. He is a rich source of elemental energy, but God has contrived it so that we must use our energy to release his power. This necessary interaction depends upon an

art that can only be learned with discipline and practice. We can reduce our labor through ovens, stoves, lamps, saws, axes, and other tools; but it is the practice of interacting with real fire that causes the seeds of physical and spiritual nurture to germinate. In my need brother fire helped heal me. When a woman came here in pain, brother fire did what a year of therapy couldn't do.

Spirituality may start with formal prayer, meditation, or contemplation – and certainly all of these are a part of the spiritual life – but reaching up to the Creator always leads right back to the creation and mother earth. Far from desiring freedom from the tasks of living in order to pursue spirituality, my wife and I have learned that the spiritual pursuit leads deeper down and further into daily life. Just as body and soul are bound together, so reverence where before the altar in the chapel is bound to spill over and baptize the table where eat as the domestic altar of the home. Nurturing flowers to give God glory from the garden is as much an act of prayer as giving God glory by hymnsinging. The daily discipline of co-creating with the Creator and creation gives birth to spiritual athletes. Practicing the art of living in harmony with creation fathers an awareness of the Creator.

In Latin the old rule for the life of prayer was ORA ET LABORA, which means pray and work. What has become clear to us in this wilderness is the ORA, or prayer, is not only in the chapel but also in all the LAB-ORA, or labor of living. There is a lot of hard work to the life we live, but the labor is an essential part of praying the prayer we want our lives to be. It is an essential part of the abundant life we live.

A certain clarity has come to us. As the mental fog lifts, we are beginning to see a pattern in the road of life behind us. We are also beginning to see more clearly the direction of our way into the future. In this opening episode of our pilgrimage we have been taught a powerful lesson. We have learned that both physical and spiritual health is rooted in nature. We have discovered the potency of the essential elements of earth, air, fire, and water, and learned how to tend, accept, and use their powers. For from wanting to return to urban or suburban life, we feel ourselves called to continue to explore the riches of living ever more intimately with creation and the Creator.

The price we gladly pay for the privilege of proceeding on our path is the responsibility to share with others what we have learned so far. That is what I am beginning to attempt to do with this Epiphany Message. It is also what we will continue to attempt to do with our lives, our home, and this place of prayer for all people, St. Herman's Hermitage. We will continue to live as we have come to live because what we have to share must be lived. It must be

embodied. Words and writing can hardly begin to communicate our experience of truth.

We will continue to live as we have come to live because it is important to keep a place where mother nature can still touch the spiritual aspirant. It is essential to have a place where the crucial connection between nature and spirituality isn't short circuited by electricity and plumbing. Where it is still possible to learn about God by having to win warmth and light from God's gift of fire. Where it is still possible for mother nature to teach in her time-honored way of tough love. Where discipline can still be learned. Where the potency of being nurtured by the fundamental elements can still be discovered. Where the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, offered up to God, are still the primal medicines for healing. Where nature as midwife can still ask for complete surrender to her for the birthing within us of a new child of the spirit.

The way we see our calling is simply to live as we do, to tend this place, and to share what we have learned with others. *It isn't a calling for everybody, but it is a calling that is necessary in this technology-obsessed age.* I believe it is a calling especially for those in the second half of life. In almost all cultures it is the calling of the elders and grandparents. It is the calling to keep and tend the treasures of the inner life. In Christian history it shows up as a venerable tradition of older people shedding their accumulations and moving to live simpler lives closer to God and nature and thus more available for others. It is a calling to keep the art alive. To live as intimately as possible with earth, air, fire, and water. To live as beautifully and richly as possible from these simple gifts and our own energy alone. To love God in the work of prayer and the prayer of working. As the icon of St. Herman says, "From this day forth, from this hour, from this minute, let us love God above all."

The Chapel of St. Herman's Hermitage

Centers of Interest

(Fellowship in Prayer publishes brief reports about places that offer sanctuary or support to those trying to deepen their spiritual practice. Please do not hesitate to send us any information you feel is appropriate.)

Sha'arei Orah Institute. A center for Jewish spiritual renewal. Drawing from the depth of the largely neglected Jewish mystical tradition, Sha'arei Orah provides a warm, undemanding community framework where students and members can share the rediscovery of their roots and a deeper understanding of themselves. Weekly classes are offered on the Torah and on Jewish throught. For further information, contact: Rabbi David Dinn. Sha'arei Orah Institute, 33 Webster St., Brooklyn, NY 11230 – (718) 436-6758.

John Stokes (whose talk on Native American spirituality was featured in our February issue) will teach this summer at the North East Camping Center, a mountain camp for boys in the woodlands of northeastern Pennsylvania. The director and staff place a strong emphasis on building an appreciation of Native American skills, self-sufficiency, music, and the wilderness. For more information contact Joseph Fili, Director, 352 B Fort Plains Rd., Howell, New Jersey 07731 (201) 367-8936.

OPENINGS FOR WORK – STUDY – CENTERING

The following centers have indicated that they are looking for people to assist in daily work and practice. Other openings may be available in your local area. Keep us posted, and we'll pass along the information to interested readers.

The Kripalu Yoga Ashram is looking for people to do Seva (spiritual service). For those with skills/experience in landscape gardening, maintenance, and other areas, this is an opportunity to use daily work as a tool for personal transformation in a community dedicated to personal growth. You must be willing to make a commitment of one to three months. Along with work, there are morning yoga practices, evening meditations and discussions; accommodations are in a country setting, with plenty of laughter and play. Contact: Ed Karilli, Seva Exchange, Kripalu Yoga Ashram, 7 Walters Rd., Sumneytown, PA 18084 – (215) 234-4568.

The Omega Institute, one of the largest centers for holistic education in the U.S., has work-exchange and work-study programs worth exploring. Their summer program includes workshops in psychic training, holistic health, earth studies, family and personal relationships, eco-justice, arts and spirituality. For more information, contact: The Omega Institute, Lake Drive, RD 2, Rhineneck, NY 12572 – (914) 876-2058 (till May 15) and (914) 266-4301 (from May 15 to September 15).

Prayer:

A Pilgrimage of the Soul

by Uma Majmudar

Once a disciple asked his teacher this question, "Sir, have you seen God?"

The master said, "Yes, I have seen God as tangibly as I see you. I have even talked to him more intimately than I'm talking with you." When the devotee looked astonished beyond words, the master added, "But my child, who wants to see God? People shed jugs of tears for money, a wife and children, but no one really weeps for God. If only they yearned to see God as a miser pines for gold, one day they would surely see Him."

The disciple was Narendranath Datta, later on to become Swami Vivekananda and spread the message of Vedanta in the West; his master was the nineteenth century Hindu sage, Sri Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna could not read or write; he had not studied scriptures either, and still he lived to exemplify profound spiritual truths. Straight from his lifelong experience, he affirmed that only an ardent, sincere and unselfish prayer can lead to the realization of God.

In order to pray, one must have: an intense yearning, a heart concentrated on God alone, preparation, regular practice, and follow-up in one's day-to-day life. How many of us can pray intensely, unselfishly and regularly? How many of us really want to experience that spiritual ecstasy in which the human soul merges into the Divine soul?

If there were a spiritual-enrichment course in "How to Pray," there would be different levels according to the stage one is in. A majority would have to take a "Beginner's Course;" a few would qualify for the "Intermediate level"; few would be admitted to the "Advanced level," and only a rare person would ever make it to the spiritual summit of an inseparable union with the Divine.

The beginners are in an infancy stage of praying to God. Their prayers are pleas for material things. They beg, "Oh God, please give me a nice job, a bigger house, health and wealth. . . ." This "give me" list is endless. They are as selfish or self-oriented at this stage as a toddler who keeps claiming, "This is *my* toy, *my* house, *my* Mommy." They are solicitors of favors from God and look upon Him as a grand patron, a boon-giver, a Benevolent Father.

We are also taught to pray whenever we are in trouble, pain, impossible situations, or utter fear for our life. At times when a vicious dog chases us, a terrible accusation is made upon our character, or when we're suffering from the flu or cancer, we turn to God for help. We cry ardently, "Oh God, save me, help me, rescue me." Here again, we are solicitors of God's mercy and kindness. We look upon Him as our "true friend in need," a Savior, a trouble-shooter.

Prayers out of fear of God's wrath, disapproval and punishment are also common in almost every religion. Here we plead guilty, cry and confess before the "Supreme Court Judge," and ask for his forgiveness. So God becomes either our punisher or pardoner.

From this "give me", "save me", "pardon me" stage, we gradually move on to the next stage. Now we learn to go to God not only to ask or beg, but also to thank Him for all the goodies we enjoy in our life. Our prayers are praises, appreciation and "thank-you notes" addressed to God. When we get promoted, get a long-awaited baby, or an award for excellence at work, we pray out of gratitude.

In the intermediate stage, there is a definite progress in our approach to God. Along with the "thank yous", we now begin to look outside our own needs, troubles and desires. As we mature in awareness, understanding and compassion, our prayers become "other-oriented." This is a very important step from "me" to "you", from "us" to "them," from local to general welfare. We pray God to attend to the more needy, the less fortunate, the desperately distressed: "Oh God, save the starving millions in Ethiopia or assuage the tears of the victims of racial violence," and so on.

When such prayers become part of our daily routine, we are moving to the threshold of the advanced stage. Prayers are not haphazard; we don't pull the emergency chain of God's name as before, but spend time with our deity. Amid the madness of the world, prayer in the silence of our hearts and surroundings becomes a regular practice. People pray differently – some may chant His name, some read their holy books, others fast, do "puja", "japa" and meditation. Meditation requires total concentration on God, which presupposes a clean and uncluttered mind, free from worldly thoughts and desires. This is very hard to achieve, however. The mind is flippant, and the moment we try to concentrate, a million problems, anxieties and appointments cloud our consciousness. We must try again and again to bring the mind back to God. It is not uncommon that in the early stage of meditation, we simply unload our emotional burdens. We want to talk, cry, laugh, and beg Him to understand us. At this stage, God appears to us as the inward psychologist who listens quietly, without passing judgments, while we talk and talk.

As we talk to God daily, one day we hear His voice. Now He begins to speak and we learn to listen. We wonder: Who is this voice? Where is it? Inside me or outside? We remember all the descriptions of God: that He is a universal Supreme Being, that He resides in every human soul and that nothing in this world or the world beyond exists without His presence. All selfish thoughts and desires for personal and impersonal gains vanish, and we concentrate only on the Omnipresent, Omniscient, and Omnipotent God.

This is an advanced "bhakti" or devotional stage, which is extremely difficult to reach, because it is acquired – if at all – only after learning to pray sincerely, unselfishly and regularly. It requires preparation and a follow-up an integration of prayer-mood in every walk of our life – in the conscious as well as unconscious state of mind.

In order to rise to higher levels of spirituality, one has to prepare seriously and regularly. First, one's emphasis in life has to shift from the material joys and comforts to the deeper, simpler and eternal joys. One still enjoys everything in life, but the outlook is changed. One goes beyond the transience of life, relations, things, situations; and one stays calm, serene and contemplative at the core of one's being. Personality also gets transformed; the agitation of the mind is reduced, and one is more drawn to "the real thing" or "the real person." The nature of pleasures changes, so also the kind of activities undergo a change; one seeks solitude, meets holy people, visits holy places and engages in holy missions in life.

Only when one changes gears, do one's goals and lifestyle acquire a deeper perspective in life. Now one becomes ready to receive God, to see and feel Him in everything and every place. The little self then merges into the Higher Self.

Realization of God, or the Supreme Being, is the ultimate goal of prayer. True prayer is a pilgrimage of the soul to its final destination – Eternity and Deliverance. In the Vedantic sense, it is the search of *atman* (little self) for *Paramatman* or the Highest Self. When individual consciousness transcends into a universal, cosmic consciousness, one realizes BRAHMAN, or the Absolute God. In this state, there is total oblivion of space, time, body, ego, sense-pleasures and pain, heat and cold, honor and insults. This is "Bhava-samadhi" or spiritual ecstasy, experienced by such sages as Sri Ramakrishna.

It cannot be described; it has to be experienced. It cannot be sought; it has to be seen and felt. The only way to reach the peak is through ardent, unselfish, and regular prayers integrated in one's thoughts, actions, goals and entire being.

* *

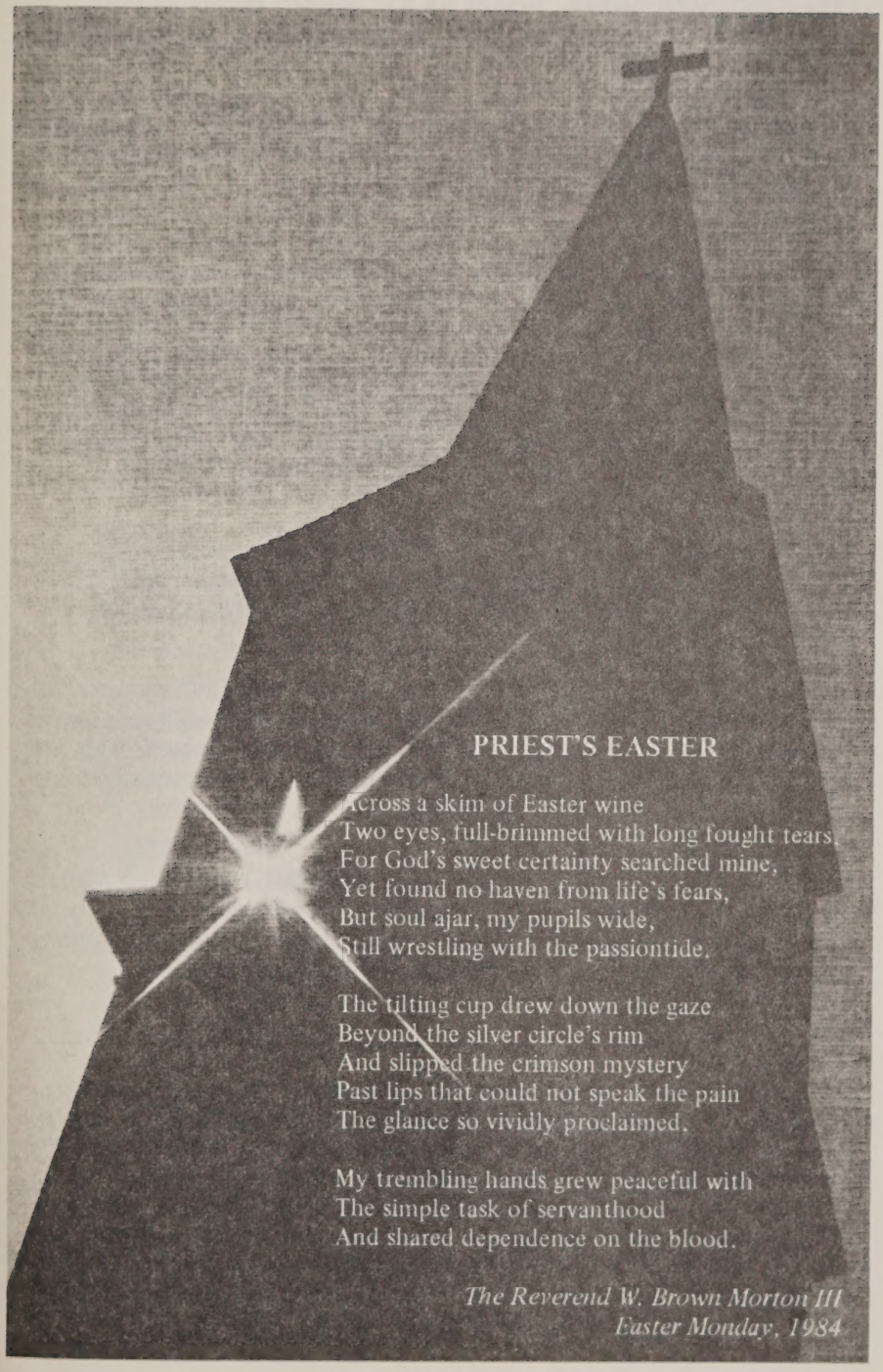
EXTREMISM

By Rabbi Samuel Silver

Said the man to the psychiatrist, "My problem is I like wheatcakes." Said the psychiatrist, "There's nothing wrong with that. I like them too."

"Come to my house, doctor," said the man, "I've got closets full of them."

Life is a tightrope walk, in which we try to achieve a balance between various tendencies, avoiding obsessions. Judaism is a faith which commends to us "the middle way." May we make use of that faith to stabilize our lives!



PRIEST'S EASTER

Across a skim of Easter wine
Two eyes, full-brimmed with long fought tears,
For God's sweet certainty searched mine,
Yet found no haven from life's fears,
But soul ajar, my pupils wide,
Still wrestling with the passiontide.

The tilting cup drew down the gaze
Beyond the silver circle's rim
And slipped the crimson mystery
Past lips that could not speak the pain
The glance so vividly proclaimed.

My trembling hands grew peaceful with
The simple task of servanthood
And shared dependence on the blood.

The Reverend W. Brown Morton III
Easter Monday, 1984

Notes on Our Contributors

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"Spiritual Boundaries" is an excerpt from "Seeking and Finding," a pamphlet available through the Wider Quaker Fellowship, an association of persons of different races, creeds, and nationalities who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being involved in its membership. Born in the mind of Rufus M. Jones, Quaker mystic and teacher, it came into being in 1936 and now has over three thousand members from more than sixty countries. For more information, write Betsy Dearborn, Friends World Committee, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

"The Householder and the Pilgrim" originally appeared in Tributaries *("a newsletter to encourage clearsighted spiritual study"). For more information, write to Lorette Zirker, Iroquois House Publishers, Box 211, Mountain Park, NM 88325.*

"Reading 'The Book' of Nature": Wayne Teasdale has written a book, Essays on Mysticism, *as well as an essay on "The Radical Challenge of St. Francis" for* The Contemplative Review. *He is a member of the contemplative community at One Hundred Acres, New Boston, NH.*

"Prayer: A Pilgrimage" of the Soul": Uma Majmudar, who holds a Masters degree in English from Gujarat University, has completed the study of journalism at Georgia State University. She is currently engaged in writing articles on immigrant issues and Gandhi as well as plays for children.

The Surrender Group sponsored by the Fellowship In Prayer meets weekly at the Princeton Friends Meeting (School Building) on Thursday nights between 8 and 10 pm. All are welcome. Transportation and information are available by calling the Fellowship office (609) 896-3636 during business hours.

The Surrender Group is intended to be open to persons from a broad range of backgrounds, and is primarily concerned with practical ways through which we may learn "to surrender ourselves as the center of our lives and to accept Truth as the center, and thus to discover a way of life that brings meaning, affection, joy, and some measure of inward peace".

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Concepts create idols:
only wonder comprehends anything.

–St Gregory of Nyssa

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